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## Five Perspectives for Leadership Success

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**Here's how principals, coaches, and other leaders can sustain the vitality they bring to the job.**

New school leaders typically start out full of enthusiasm. They're going to make a difference by bringing about changes that benefit students. They'll support teacher growth while creating an environment of collegiality and success. They'll lead by sharing helpful information, data, and practices. They are energized!

And then, sometime in their first year, these new leaders often find themselves disappointed, exhausted, and full of self-doubt. Their efforts have been met with apathy or resistance. Their initiatives have encountered unexpected obstacles. They thought they were well-liked professionals, but sometimes they feel like they are amateurs, imposters, or monsters.

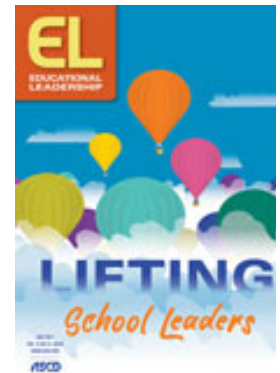
When new principals, coaches, curriculum developers, special education consultants, or others in schoolwide leadership positions find themselves in these situations, they often redouble their efforts. They send more e-mail, provide more explanations at staff meetings, work longer days, and attempt to prove their qualifications by showing extreme competence in all they do. But these efforts often merely dig the new school leader deeper into exhaustion and despair, like a driver who tries to get the car out of mud or snow by pressing harder on the accelerator and as a result mires the car more deeply. What's needed is not harder work, but a shift in perspectives.

Here are five perspectives that helped me when I was an elementary school principal, a reading program coordinator, and a literacy coach. I have shared these perspectives in workshops, conference presentations, and publications and I find they have been helpful to other educators around the world. Reflecting on these five shifts can make all the difference in the success of school leaders, old and new.

### Perspective 1:

#### **Teachers are well-intentioned, hard-working people who care about students.**

This first perspective often seems obvious to everyone who works in schools. They think, "Of course teachers are good people." However, on further reflection, school leaders sometimes find that their everyday thoughts and actions don't always reflect this belief.

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New school leaders sometimes spend their energies sorting out which teachers are the hard-working ones, the doers, the ones who care about students—and which teachers aren't. They make a mental list of the teachers who appear innovative, the teachers who seem old-fashioned, the younger teachers (whom they assume will be more energetic), the veteran teachers (whom they assume are stuck in their ways), the teachers who need help, the teachers who don't seem to care, and so on. This mental sorting often reflects opinions based on superficial interactions and a lot of judging.

Although school leaders may assume that these inner thoughts are not evident to others, that's often not the case. School leaders may hint at their thoughts by subtly implying dissatisfaction—for instance, saying "We have a lot of work to do to bring the curriculum to life in every math classroom at school"—or by subconscious body language such as a shift of the shoulders or a crossing of the legs when a particular teacher is voicing an opinion.

As humans, we're hardwired to sense danger, which in the modern world may mean a supervisor's lack of trust in one's work or a colleague's intention to reshape our practices even though she doesn't fully understand the context of our work. Typically, teachers and others in such situations don't articulate their concerns explicitly; in fact, they may not even be consciously aware of them. Rather, they experience a general sense of mistrust or dissatisfaction with the school leader, which often spirals into low morale and dysfunction in the entire school.

The concept of "giving an A" (Zander & Zander, 2002) can be helpful to new school leaders. With this perspective, one approaches all people with the assumption that they deserve a grade of A. For school leaders, this means that all teachers and other staff are considered A-quality teachers, teaching assistants, specialists, custodians, and so forth. If certain employees are not performing at their best, these leaders assume it's because something has gotten in the way of the employees' success, not because they are poor-quality employees. The leader's job, then, is to help people figure out what's getting in the way and remove those obstacles so that everyone's innate "A-ness" shines through.

## Perspective 2:

### It's not about information.

New school leaders are often eager learners who take graduate courses, attend professional conferences, and read extensively in their field. That's excellent. But as a result of their own learning, new school leaders are sometimes eager to share their knowledge with others, under the assumption that if others understand what the leader understands, everyone will be onboard with the leader's ideas. To their disappointment, these leaders often find their well-intentioned information-sharing rejected or ignored.

At play here is the phenomenon—recognized by researchers in fields such as cognitive science, linguistics, and political science—that people's beliefs will often supersede information that contradicts those beliefs (Dossey, 2016). So when school leaders share information that teachers are not ready to believe, the information is often ignored or contradicted. Worse, the purveyor of such information may be labeled as a know-it-all or pushy.

When school leaders understand the limits of information, they start with beliefs and values. They do so by focusing on a passion that virtually every teacher shares: the well-being and success of students. By focusing on the teachers' care for their students, leaders start with what drives most teachers to pay attention and to open up to others' ideas. Then, savvy leaders enact a problem-solving cycle that enables teachers to explore any challenges preventing their students' successes and identify what they—the teachers—want to learn to implement the strategies they believe will help (Toll, 2017). Teachers are less likely to reject new information that contradicts the beliefs when they have control over what they learn and how they learn it (Calvert, 2016).

## Perspective 3:

## Everyone has their own vision of success.

Some preparation programs encourage leaders to develop a vision for their school or their program and then find ways to get others to "buy into" that vision. In other words, the leader's task is to market his or her ideas to other

Such an approach is problematic for several reasons. First, it puts the decision-making power entirely in the domain of the school leader. Second, it assumes that the school leader knows what is best for every teacher and every situation in the school. And third, it fails to recognize that most people don't like to be "sold" anything; people want to feel that they are making choices in their own lives. It is no wonder, then, that school leaders who announce their vision or their great new idea often meet resistance.

Sam Chaltain (2009) asserted that a leader's job is to *find* the school's vision, not to create one. In other words, savvy leaders pay close attention to what's happening in the school and then guide the staff in developing a vision that reflects the priorities and passions of those who work and learn there.

In addition, school leaders may want to catch themselves when they ask questions that begin, "How can I get teachers to ... " As soon as the word *get* shows up in relation to others, wise leaders will realize that they are trying to persuade or control people in an effort to reach their own goals. At best, such an effort would require a sales job; at its worst, it would require a battle. Instead of pursuing their interest in "getting" someone to do something, leaders might rework their interest to consider how they can collaborate with others around the topic or problem at hand, so together teachers and leaders can develop a plan that's owned by all.

## Perspective 4:

### Resistance makes perfect sense to the person who's resisting.

When new school leaders encounter resistance to a great idea, they often find themselves mentally criticizing the people who oppose it. These leaders conclude that those who are resisting are unwilling to change, lack a strong work ethic, or have misplaced priorities.

It might be more productive for school leaders to think about times when they've resisted others' ideas—for instance, times when they told their child he could not have a begged-for toy (or tattoo!); or when they told their physician that a particular treatment was not for them; or when they told their spouse that it was not the right time to take a big vacation. When people think about why they've resisted others' ideas, they usually realize that their reasons were good ones. For instance, parents say no to children to keep them safe, patients select treatments that will best fit their individual needs and approach to health, and spouses want to be good stewards of the family budget.

Similarly, when teachers resist the ideas or initiatives of new school leaders, their reasons make perfect sense to them. For instance, these teachers might have worked hard to develop their current practices and view these practices as best for students. They might believe that a proposed change would be too demanding on their time or they might think that a new idea reverses the trajectory of school programs of the past few years. When school leaders understand resistance from this perspective, they avoid judging teachers negatively. Instead, they tune in to better understand what teachers are thinking. This process has the potential to create a productive dialogue, enabling teachers and leaders to approach problem solving and planning together to address school needs.

## Perspective 5:

### Every situation is best approached by listening first.

New school leaders sometimes respond to challenging situations by immediately focusing on what they need to say or do. After all, they were hired to take the lead. Sometimes, too, they're insecure about how they're viewed by others and want to be sure they're seen as knowledgeable and decisive. Thus, they step up to the challenge and declare what should happen next.

This quick response may lead to a solution, but it's just as likely to backfire. Difficult situations require discernment, which takes time. Often, new school leaders don't fully understand the multiple dimensions of what's happening and the history of how the school has addressed similar situations before. In addition, some staff members may have valuable information, practices, or beliefs related to the situation, but a quick-acting school leader is likely to miss these resources.

It's wiser to listen and learn first. When leaders tune in to others, they understand challenges more completely, and as a result they'll be more likely to come up with productive solutions—or even better, to solicit further involvement by others. Solutions are nearly always better when leaders have help in choosing a path, and those who were involved in developing a plan are more likely to be enthusiastic about implementing it.

In fact, this fifth perspective summarizes the key idea behind the previous four: Tune in, and be inclusive. Remain open to others; value their knowledge, skills, and beliefs. The irony is that leaders who do less of the work themselves are often viewed as more effective. Such leaders are likely to face less resistance and indifference because they've learned how to involve many people in shaping the work of the school.

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